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Race Relations | Introduction

In a 1995 *Washington Post* opinion poll, participants were asked, “How big a problem is racism in our society today?” Sixty-seven percent of surveyed blacks stated that racism was a big problem, while only 38 percent of whites agreed. In another 1995 *Washington Post* survey, 36 percent of whites felt that “past and present discrimination is a major reason for the economic and social problems” facing blacks, but more than half of the African American respondents agreed that discrimination remained a significant barrier to blacks’ success.

Numerous polls and surveys taken throughout the 1990s reveal that whites and minorities often hold sharply contrasting opinions about racial discrimination and race relations. According to President Bill Clinton’s Advisory Board on Race, whites and people of color see “racial progress so differently that an outsider could easily believe that whites and most minorities . . . see the world through different lenses.” Often referred to as the racial “perception gap,” this difference of opinion between whites and nonwhites is especially noticeable when examining public opinion on governmental attempts to redress racism and discrimination. For example, recent surveys indicate that between 60 and 75 percent of whites oppose affirmative action policies—measures that increase minority representation in the workplace by including race as a factor in hiring decisions—while 65 to 70 percent of minorities support them. In addition, a Gallup poll reveals that 65 percent of blacks supported a 1997 proposal for Congress to apologize for slavery, while 67 percent of whites opposed such an apology.

What accounts for such differences of opinion between whites and minorities? Certainly, most Americans today seem to detest bigotry and claim to support the ideal of racial equality. Yet, for some reason, most people of color see racial discrimination as an ongoing impediment, while a majority of whites believe that much of the problem of racial intolerance in the United States has been solved.

Many analysts maintain that this racial perception gap is a result of the different life experiences that whites and minorities have. As legal analyst Richard Delgado states, “White people rarely see acts of blatant or subtle racism, while minority people experience them all the time.” Psychologist John Dovidio agrees: “We [whites] tend to see racism as not a problem and particularly not a problem for us. [However], people of color experience . . . subtle biases on a daily basis. They see a discrepancy between what we say overtly, which is about fairness, justice, and equality, and the subtle biases that pervade our society.”

These biases, many point out, are evident in white people’s reactions to people of color. Minorities report that whites are often anxious in their presence: Salesclerks follow them around in stores, worried that they might shoplift something; taxi drivers refuse to give them rides; police pull them over to check their cars for weapons or drugs; whites seem fearful when they have to stand near black or Latino men in elevators. Such occurrences, experts maintain, are

often the result of negative racial stereotypes that have permeated American society for generations. These stereotypes include the beliefs that racial minorities are less intelligent and more prone to criminal behavior than whites are. People are exposed to such stereotypes early in life, and they can become part of a person's worldview even though he or she may genuinely believe that prejudice is wrong. "In America," writes author David Shipler, "a child has only to breathe and listen and watch to accumulate the prejudices that govern ordinary thought. Even without willful intention, with no active effort, a youngster absorbs the images and caricatures surrounding race. Nobody growing up in America can escape the assumptions . . . that attach themselves to one group or another."

Intensifying the lingering problem of stereotypes, many commentators contend, is the fact that many American communities remain segregated. As a result, numerous people go through life with no significant or long-term contact with those of other races, and they are not afforded the perspective that could be gained from cross-racial interaction. Whites, for example, do not usually experience much prejudice in their own lives or know many people who have experienced racial discrimination, so they may conclude that racism is not much of a problem today. On the other hand, minorities' encounters with racial discrimination make it more difficult for them to believe that whites could support the goal of racial equality. Moreover, repeated experiences with racism can cause people of color to feel indignant or cynical about race relations.

The racial perception gap is further complicated by what authors Leonard Steinhorn and Barbara Diggs-Brown refer to as a "cycle of misunderstanding." They contend that a chain reaction of misunderstandings begins with the notion that discrimination is no longer a problem in America. The more whites disclaim the existence of discrimination, the more blacks and other minorities feel compelled to insist that discrimination still occurs. "To the white ear that makes black demands seem strident and aggressive, which then reinforces the white view that blacks are complaining," maintain Steinhorn and Diggs-Brown. Many end up believing that minorities simply exaggerate their experiences of racism, while others conclude that whites are in deep denial about racism's current realities.

Addressing the intricacies of the perception gap is proving to be a daunting challenge for Americans. Many believe that whites and minorities must candidly discuss their experiences and differences of opinion with each other to arrive at a fuller understanding of what racial justice requires. Others, however, maintain that patience and forbearance—not dialogue—will lead the nation to a less polarized perspective on race relations. *Race Relations: Opposing Viewpoints* examines the racial perception gap and related issues in the following chapters: What Is the State of Race Relations in America? Is Racism a Serious Problem? How Should Policymakers Respond to Minorities' Concerns? How Can Race Relations Be Improved? The viewpoints presented in this volume will give readers valuable insights on the complexities of race and ethnicity in today's America.